

“WHAT FOLLOWS IF GOD GETS GOD’S WAY?”

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Did you see Morgan Freeman’s the *Story of God* on television? It encompasses not just Christianity, but all of the world’s great religions. It was interesting how they began the series. Freeman stood on a bridge in his hometown, Greenwood, MS, telling of hurdles he faced there like falling in love, getting a driver’s license. He spoke of first facing death through the loss of loved ones, such as his brother. Some people have something that helps, he said. They are certain they will see their loved ones again when they die. It is the great question we ask ourselves, Freeman continued. What happens when we die? What is beyond our deaths?

Yes, all faiths trade in what we call ultimate concern. So it makes sense to start a series telling God’s story asking about life’s end. If we want to make a good start, navigate well the middle part, and not lose hope moving through the penultimate stages, we need to trust that things will end well. Looking for happy endings isn’t mere sentimentality. We are all hard-wired for it. It fortifies our capacity to trust in life’s goodness daily despite so much dark evidence to the contrary along the way. It takes audacity to watch the evening news. It takes courage to bring faith to life every day. It requires strength and fortitude and trust in a will bigger than our own.

Our scripture for the third Sunday in Easter is from the book of Revelation, John’s vision of how things end. We use that phrase “the end” in a two-fold sense. First, it’s like the final act of a play, the finale, the finish, the closing out of a story. In the case of the book of Revelation, it offers us scenes from its visions of heaven.

But we also use the phrase *the end* in another sense, meaning, the point of it all, the purpose, *the end* in that sense. This is one case where the ends do justify the means, or at least they can, in the form of longsuffering people maintaining hope. That is how the persecuted readers of Revelation were living, hated and chased. The final book of the NT reveals that in the end all who want God shall be with God. All who pray for God’s will enter the company where that will is fulfilled. And what we can only glimpse now in bits and pieces, through a mirror dimly as Paul the Apostle says, we will eventually perceive clearly, eye to eye and face to face.

This twin sense of *the end* is part and parcel of living the faith and doing ministry. For you see, if we gain insight into the finale, how the story of the world finishes, then we can also better understand and live out now our purpose for being alive. So as the book of Revelation previews heaven, that time and place where God’s will shall be done, we can learn to jettison our despair and live more confidently now in the gnawing tension between the world as it is and the world as it shall be.

So what does Revelation reveal about the end of time and our end on this earth? This dreamy story draped in all kinds of symbolism asks who is worthy to open

the scroll that contains the answers to the mysteries of what shall become of us. There is only one. It is the one who sits upon the throne before a great multitude.

He is not a Lion, some Roman tyrant Emperor of the day. All earthly potentates are now dethroned. Sitting on the throne is the Lamb of God. He alone is worthy. He is not only the one qualified to open the scroll but also to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing. In other words, every good thing this life can offer is laid at the feet of the Lamb. His dominion is all-inclusive as he reigns over all that is, even our human politics and economics.

Here the curtain has been pulled back and we are privy to the real truth about the final destination of the world. We learn who is and will be ultimately in charge. When the kingdom of God has come, God will finally get what God wants for all.

I adore that image of the afterlife as the time and place where God gets what he wants. I love it because we pass our lives striving relentlessly, even desperately, to get what we want. And it's striking how as humans get what we want, it always sets up winners and losers, insiders and outsiders, favored and rejected. But with heaven as the place where God finally gets what he wants, it is different. The good fortune and lifting up of one doesn't mean another must get dragged down.

It is different for me to preach and for you to hear a sermon about this. Mainline Protestant Christianity prefers to focus on the here and now—the life we live here and now—over visions of heaven. And the truth is Jesus truly doesn't want us to speculate on the timing of "thy kingdom come, they will be done." Heaven is not a place where we finally get what we want, but where God gets what God wants.

By knowing that God will get his way, and this is everything we could have ever hoped for, means we're freed from the burden of always having to have our way; from always having to be in control of circumstances that are finally uncontrollable; from settling the score by having to hit back and get even to keep an upper hand; from enforcing our religion over creation like God died and put all of us in charge.

No, the world we live in now is not the world God created as the book of Genesis opens. In the beginning the story says we mucked around where we didn't belong and botched things up. Since then, the creation has not met divine expectations. We all sense the distance between the world as it is and God's will for the world. This gap and the prospect it will never narrow and close makes us groan inside. And for the church to stop leaning toward God's new heaven and new earth relaxes a tension that compromises the church and accommodates us to the world.

As I readied Kevin and Karen for baptizing Derek into such a world today, living in this gap with the rest of us, I tried to draw back to put this in the larger context. I insisted Derek belonged to God within Karen before they knew him. I reminded them that even after they are gone from this planet, Derek will still belong to God. And because God's claim on him is eternal and theirs is temporal, if Derek feels

led to inner city ministries or water projects in Africa or to set up a clinic in Kabul, they need to let him go. After all, God might recruit Derek to erase this awful gap

One reason we mainline Protestants resist talk about heaven, or we dismiss it as pie-in-the-sky-by-and-by, is because we like running things down here below. We like to think of ourselves as the people in charge, as on top of things, as those in power, as those whose young are well-fixed, well-housed and well-futured. But Revelation reminds us who will finally call the shots despite our illusions of glory. Notice that as the Lamb of God rules from the throne, heaven isn't of our striving and making. Rather, heaven results from God's gracious creation and restoration.

Easter is a foretaste of all this, of how God will erase the gap between hard, grinding reality and radiantly cherished hope. How God will raise all that's broken, restore all who are tarnished, finish what promisingly began in Genesis. Easter is a glimpse to inspire our passion for God getting what God wants. Someone said pray as though it all depends on God, and act as though it all depends upon you.

Every week, as we pray *thy kingdom come, thy will be done* we confess the point is not climbing to the top of the pile of grasping humanity, only to be knocked off. In the end, our hope in life, in death and in any life beyond death is that God gets what God wants. That's the win-win-win scenario, God's vindication and not ours.

The last time I saw my mother in February, she did something I'd never seen before. This tough, blonde, 85 year old little girl, raised with 11 siblings in the harsh hollers of West Virginia to coal-mining parents, dissolved into tears as Cecile and I departed. I got back out of the car to hug her and dry her tears. "If I don't see you again on this side," she gasped, "I will see you on the other side of the river."

We'll all reach a point where we face a dead end, a brick wall, where human progress is beside the point. Today, with my mother, I lift up the God who triumphs, a God who isn't stumped by our rebellion or stymied by human sin, a God who deserves to sit on the throne as the Lord over death and the Lord over our lives. We are meant for promises bigger than our human striving, efforts, and progress.

So Happy Easter still, everyone. Trust in the Lamb who will reign from his throne. Amen.